

DANCE, SENSES, URBAN CONTEXTS

Dance and the Senses · Dancing and Dance Cultures in Urban Contexts



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STEPS, STYLE AND SENSING THE DIFFERENCE:
AN EXAMINATION OF MOLYNEAUX'S TRADITIONAL SET DANCES
WITHIN COMPETITION CULTURE

In this paper I examine the appropriation of one particular version of solo traditional set dances from the region of North Kerry, Ireland, by teachers of competitive step dancing and by competitive step dancers for competition. These set dances are the Blackbird and Saint Patrick's Day; they were choreographed by Jeremiah Molyneaux, the last of the itinerant dancing masters of North Kerry (circa 1881–1965) (see Foley 2013). Different versions of these dances existed within the traditional practice of the region, and the objective of the paper is to enquire into the reasoning behind the appropriation of one version of these dances and how competitive step dance teachers and dancers learned to embody them as representative of a regional step-dance style. The paper argues that competitive dancers might benefit from theoretical and proprioceptive training in the stylistic embodiment of these solo set dances.

Keywords: Irish dance; competition; transmission; proprioception; embodiment; senses

In this paper I examine the recent appropriation of solo Irish traditional set dances from the region of North Kerry, Ireland, by teachers of competitive step dancing and by competitive step dancers for competition within the Irish step-dance organisation, An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha. The objective of the paper is to enquire into the reasoning behind this appropriation, and how competitive step dance teachers and dancers have learned to perform these set dances. The paper proposes a multi-sensory method of transmission for a more embodied stylistic understanding of these regional set dances. Theoretically, the paper draws from the work of Bourdieu, Morris, Ness, Stoller and, indeed, my own research.

In the field

In the 1980s, I underwent fieldwork in the rural region of North Kerry, Ireland to collect for preservation the step dances of Jeremiah Molyneaux, known to be the last of the itinerant dancing masters of the region. Molyneaux (circa 1881–1965; see Foley 2013) was the last of a line of itinerant dancing masters in the region who contributed to the development of step dancing as a solo dance genre. Since Molyneaux had died in 1965, an important method in my research was using my dance competence as an Irish step dancer to learn to embody the Molyneaux step dances from Molyneaux's surviving students. I also documented the dances – using a mnemonic system, Labanotation, and video-recording them; I also interviewed the dancers. Thus, from 1983–1985 I visited and learned from these dancers. In my book, *Step dancing in Ireland: culture and history* [2013], I state:

When learning from the Molyneaux step dancers I used my own body as a methodological research tool to embody, sense and store their dance knowledge. The

Molyneaux step dancers danced in a different way to that in which I had been trained [within the competitive arena]. The posture was not held in the same erect posture; although erect it appeared softer. Also, the arms were held loosely by the sides of the body. The gaze of the dancer was not always facing directly forward, sometimes it was looking towards the ground in a forward, low position. This gave a feeling of performing for oneself and not for a formal audience [...] In learning the step dances I visually, aurally and kinaesthetically imitated the movements of each dancer [...] I was feeling and sensing these rhythmic movement patterns in order to understand how these movements fit the music and also how they fit on my body [...] I knew I could never understand it as they understood it, since they had experienced it all their lives, but I could attempt to appreciate what it felt like to dance in this specific way in order to document, analyse and interpret their dance and also to understand more deeply the world that this dance form referenced. [Foley 2013:93]

In addition, I continue:

These step dances were performed in a close-to-the-floor style with precision, discipline, neatness and rhythmic timing of the feet in dialogue with the accompanying music. Subtle detail of the feet and the manner in which the feet moved and flowed while dancing, was characteristic of this dance practice. Leading with the ankle in some movements was considered important for stylistic purposes. [Foley 2013:95]

Also, improvisation was an important characteristic of this practice of step dancing. To quote from my book again:

The personality, musicality and identity of the step dancer was embodied in the dance within its practice in North Kerry and each dancer was expected to put something of himself, or herself, into the dance. The Molyneaux step dancers referred to this as 'style' or 'putting style into it' and they contributed to this sense of style by individually varying or improvising step dances in performance. [Foley 2013:98]

During the 1970s, An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha (short: An Coimisiún), the largest international organisation for Irish competitive step dancing, programmed competitions for traditional solo set dancing. This was an endeavour to revive solo traditional set dances as some members of the organisation believed that the transmission and performance of these dances were on the decline. Four traditional set dances were therefore selected to be performed by dancers in competition and by aspiring teachers in their teachers' examinations. These set dances included "The Blackbird", "Saint Patrick's Day", "The Garden of Daisies" and "The Job of Journeywork". A particular version of each of these sets was prescribed and institutionalised, omitting other versions of these set dances, and indeed other set dances. Dancers, teachers and adjudicators thus came to understand traditional set dancing within this narrow, prescribed and institutionalised way. As I argued in my earlier research, these set dances were presented as "frozen in time" and indeed the notion of "tradition" was by extension perceived as frozen in time [Foley 1988]. However, within the practice in North Kerry, there were different versions of set dances, and as mentioned above, individual step dancers varied and improvised dances in performance.

In 2012, An Coimisiún changed the ruling on the traditional set dances and allowed for different regional versions of the four set dances to be performed in competition. Also, another three set dances were added to the list of traditional set dances: "Jockey to the Fair", "The King of the Fairies", and "The Three Sea Captains". Of interest was that in this endeavour one particular popular version of Molyneaux's "Blackbird" and "Saint Patrick's Day" set dances were introduced into the competitive arena. This introduction was by one teacher, Michael Ryan at one competition – the Mini Munsters in 2012. Michael Ryan was, and is, a tutor at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick and over the years he had witnessed students on the MA Irish Traditional Dance Performance programme perform them. As founding course director of the MA programme in 1999, I generally extended students understanding of repertoire and style in Irish dance by encouraging them to embody regional styles, as well as world dance practices and contemporary dance principles. Tutors from different regions representative of these styles were invited to teach on the programme, and North Kerry was one of these regions. Dancers from North Kerry and myself, taught some of the Molyneaux material as part of that regional style. It was therefore of interest when Michael Ryan taught his daughter one of Molyneaux's popular "Blackbird" set dances from North Kerry for competition with An Coimisiún. She won the competition and thereafter Molyneaux's material was in demand by teachers and dancers within An Coimisiún for competition. Today, there are workshops in Ireland and abroad on the Molyneaux material – particularly the popular versions of the "Blackbird" and "Saint Patrick's Day" set dances. Indeed, I was invited to teach a workshop on it at the University of Limerick for Irish dance teachers. Of interest, was the way these teachers learned. All attempted to learn the dance corporeally by imitation; most used their mobile phones to video-record my dancing. These teachers were interested in getting the sequence of movements right. They danced, however, these movements in a competitive style. The nuance and style of the Molyneaux practice of North Kerry was missing. Indeed, to embody the style, more time would have to have been devoted to it, than was allowed at the workshop. And away from the workshop, these teachers would rely on their short corporeal-cognitive experience at the workshop and their mobile phones.

So, what happens to a traditional dance when it is re-contextualised, institutionalised and popularised for competitive purposes? What happens to a traditional dance when it is performed by dancers who have spent years training and embodying a different aesthetic?

Irish competitive step dancers have trained for years within competition oriented schools, have competed frequently at regulated competitive events – *feiseanna* and *oireachtais* (see Foley 2001; 2012; 2013), and have gradually acquired a constructed Irish dancing body. This Irish step dancing body advocates uprightness, control, discipline, and virtuosity together with an embodied knowledge of technical and aesthetic characteristics of the dance form. In relation to ballet, the dance historian, Geraldine Morris makes a similar argument. She states that ballet dancers are "balletically constructed individuals, with all that this involves physically, culturally and socially" [Morris 2003:21]. Furthermore, the anthropologist, Sally Ann Ness, speaks of symbolic processes which are essential to the learning of a dance form. She equates movement symbols to "action vocabulary" and states that

Performers embody these symbols as they study and gain expertise in that tradition. In the mastery of the technique, dancers learn to 'come to terms' within their bodies so as to perform the form's action vocabulary articulately and consistently. [Ness 2008:11]

In the world of Irish competitive step dance, dancers acquire particular understandings of their bodies through years of training and this – institutionalised deep tissue training becomes embodied or "inscribed" into the dancer's body, once, as Ness suggests "the body's connective tissues themselves bear the evidence of that practice" [Ness 2008:12]. After years of training, Irish competitive step dancers bear the "evidence" of their practice and they learn to exercise a particular way of seeing dance that is culturally constituted.

When, therefore, indigenous dance practices, such as Molyneaux's dance material is introduced into this Irish competition-oriented dance system, what happens to it?

According to one dance teacher and adjudicator:

Molyneaux's Blackbird and Saint Patricks Day are [...] known as the difficult traditional sets [...] Dancers, however, are laying it into the floor; it is over danced. The music is also being sacrificed and they are losing its musicality and the rhythm of the dance. [Anonymous 2016]

Very few within the competitive arena know about the Molyneaux style of dancing and dancers perform it as they would any other dance step within the competitive style of dancing.

According to another teacher and adjudicator:

They are on time but in a feis way. They are too sharp with it; the legs are brought up too high at the back; the dynamic of soft and strong is no longer there – they are pushing hard into the floor for competitive purposes; leg gestures are raised too high. Some movements like the box are not done accurately. [Anonymous 2016]

Although particular sequences of movements of the Molyneaux solo set dances are performed as they may have been within the living rural practice, the manner and style of their performance, are not embodied. According to one teacher, this is not surprising since world champion competitive step dancers, who have no knowledge of the Molyneaux tradition, are teaching and workshopping the Molyneaux sets to competitive step dancers in different parts of the world.

According to another teacher:

Many of the teachers and adjudicators do not know the Molyneaux style of dancing and although it is great to see these sets being danced in competition, the style is not taken seriously. They're not doing it right. They don't have the style. Some of them are doing it in a very technical way. The flow of it is gone. Dancers are finding it difficult to learn and so are teachers. They expect to learn it quickly, but you have to spend time getting the style. [Anonymous 2016]

This concurs with Zukerkandl's notion [1958], that we tend to "reach through the sensation to an object" [Zukerkandl in Stoller 1984:560] when we perceive things, instead of heeding the way the sensations present themselves to consciousness, or attending to the differences between sensations in different modalities (see also Howes 1991).

Within the context of competition, step dancers continue to dance the Molyneaux dances within their trained competitive style of dancing paying no heed to the regional stylistic characteristics or aesthetic values inherent within its practice. From my research in North Kerry in the 1980s, individual dancers improvised and varied step dances and set dances according to the music, the musician, the context, or how they as dancers actually *felt* on a particular occasion [Foley 2007]. Within competitive culture, step dancers are not expected to individually improvise or vary step dances and, therefore, although An Coimisiún has allowed for different regional versions of traditional solo set dances to be performed in competition, an examination of the performance of Molyneaux's set dances in competition, indicates that its unique style of performance and the aesthetic values and characteristics of its practice, are not considered. Step dancers continue to dance within their trained competitive manner and institutionalised *habitus* [Bourdieu 1973]. Also, since one version of the "Blackbird" and "Saint Patrick's Day" set dances have been popularised for competition, I would argue that a double institutionalisation has occurred.

Though flattering to Molyneaux and his choreographic competence, that his dances are now being performed in many different parts of the world through competition culture, I wonder what Molyneaux might think of how his choreographies are being performed, particularly as Molyneaux never joined An Coimisiún when he was alive but continued to teach independently in North Kerry. Are his dances and their aesthetic values not being taken seriously, as one teacher stated? Are they simply additional set-dance material for an organisation that promotes competition but who have not formally collected solo traditional step or set dances? This gives rise to questions relating to power and responsibility and "the relation of sensation to emplacement" [Feld, Basso: 1996:11].

From learning, collecting and recording the Molyneaux step dances of North Kerry, I would suggest that teachers, adjudicators and competitive step dancers might benefit from investing more time in attempting to embody the Molyneaux style of dancing should they wish to continue performing it in competition. And rather than learning regional styles in a uniform, reified and institutionalised Irish competition-oriented manner, I would suggest the use of multisensory modes of transmission by teachers. This includes encouraging dancers to listen to Irish traditional music in order to develop an individual "feel" or relationship with the music; to visually and kinesthetically embody the dance by learning from dancers who "know" and have experience of dancing in this style; to practise the nuances of the style to understand the concept of improvisation and personal and interpersonal variations within the practice; and to attempt to sense the textures and dynamics of movements inherent in its practice. Since most of the teachers, adjudicators and competitive step dancers do not know who Molyneaux was and where he came from – indeed, some see the style as "a new style of 'Irish' dancing", I would also argue that they might benefit from reading material written on Molyneaux and this style of dancing to assist in historicising and contextualising the practice for further cultural understanding. As different stylistic forms of step dance are located in place and time, where particular value systems and knowledge are embodied, it might seem reasonable to suggest that An Coimisiún, its teachers and adjudicators assume the responsibility of transmitting the Molyneaux set-dance knowledge in a manner that respects stylistic differences and the knowledge and cultural values that are embodied within it.

Conclusion

This paper has illustrated that different practices embody particular sensorial and stylistic values which are inscribed on dancers' bodies. Thus, focusing on aspects of style and training, I have argued that Irish competitive step dancers, teachers and adjudicators have been challenged by the introduction of a dance practice – in the Molyneaux style, that embodies different sensorial and stylistic values. Thus, when versions of Molyneaux's set dances were recontextualised outside of their original context of practice, they were shaped by the new context of competition – where new meaning was ascribed to it, and new challenges were introduced for dancers, teachers, and adjudicators in relation to their knowledge and understandings of different stylistic and aesthetic step-dance parameters.

I have therefore suggested in this paper that competitive Irish step dancers might benefit from proprioceptive training in the Molyneaux step-dance practice in order to acquire an embodied understanding of its different stylistic and aesthetic value system within the broader field of step dancing in Ireland.

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